

ASSOCIATED PRESS

23 December 1983

VIENNA, AUSTRIA

VERBELEN SAYS WORKED FOR U.S. COUNTERINTELLIGENCE FOR ALMOST
BY ROLAND PRINZ

Robert Jan Verbelen, sentenced in absentia by a Belgian court to die for war crimes, said Friday that during almost 10 years with a U.S. counterintelligence in Vienna he helped prevent a communist takeover in Austria.

He said he also was offered U.S. citizenship, but turned it down because he did not want to leave Austria.

"They (U.S. authorities) wanted to make me a colonel in the U.S. intelligence service and send me to Berlin," he claimed.

Verbelen said he wants to stay in Austria "because I am married to an Austrian and my two sons are German-Austrians." That designation often is used by former Nazis and neo-Nazis in Austria, who claim neutral Austria should always should have been part of Germany.

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith reported in New York this week that the Belgian-born Verbelen, now 72 and a naturalized Austrian, had worked for U.S. Army counterintelligence here. It compared the case to that of Klaus Barbie, called the "butcher of Lyons," who worked for the United States after being sentenced to death as a Nazi war criminal by a French court.

In a telephone interview with The Associated Press from his Vienna home, Verbelen said he surrendered to U.S. intelligence after helping in the escape of Belgian soldiers and officers who voluntarily had fought for Nazi Germany against the Russians.

"The Americans questioned me for about six weeks and then asked me if I wanted to work for them, telling me: 'You are too valuable for us,' because the fight against Eastern (communist) espionage was in full swing" in the immediate postwar period, he said.

"After a few years," Verbelen said, "I became chief of department 'H' of Army counterintelligence." He added that his work was subsequently part of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency).

He said he also helped Austrian state police "because during the (1945-55 four-power) occupation Austria was not allowed to have their own intelligence service."

"To put it mildly, through my (intelligence) work I helped prevent the terrible fate" of Austria becoming a communist country as East European nations did, Verbelen asserted.

He also said Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal tried to hire him to help track down Nazi war criminals.

Wiesenthal termed the allegation "absolute nonsense." He said Verbelen held the rank of sturmbannfuhrer (comparable lieutenant colonel) in the SS during the war years in German-occupied Belgium.

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In 1947 a Belgian court, which Verbelen called in the interview a "court martial," convicted him in his absence of torturing U.S. pilots, terrorism and murder in Belgium and sentenced him to death.

Verbelen denied all war crimes charges and claimed "the trial lasted only seven minutes."

In an earlier telephone interview Thursday, Wiesenthal said he and others tried in vain for years to have Verbelen convicted as a war criminal by an Austrian court. Wiesenthal's evidence led to Verbelen's arrest in 1962. Verbelen was temporarily stripped of his Austrian citizenship, but a Supreme Court ruling in January 1963 reinstated it, preventing his extradition to Belgium.

After Austria gained independence after World War II, Verbelen said, he discontinued his intelligence work against communist espionage activities in Austria and, for his cooperation with Austrian authorities, "I received thanks by (then Interior Minister Oskar) Helmer and was granted citizenship."

"I gave the Austrians information on the work of Eastern secret service operations in the country," Verbelen said, "but I did not receive one penny for this."